

Stop Counting Calories—There's More to Weight Loss

Different foods affect your metabolism and gut microbiome differently.

By Dariush Mozaffarian, The Wall Street Journal, October 8 2026

A new patient recently came to see me after a failed attempt to lose weight. She had read labels and tracked what she ate, diligently trying to count calories. The weight came off initially, then steadily returned—until she found herself heavier than when she began. Like many, she believed the problem was discipline.

Sitting across from her, I explained that she wasn't failing calorie counting. Calorie counting was failing her. For decades, Americans have been told that body weight is governed by simple arithmetic: Count the calories you eat, estimate the calories you burn, and the math will take care of the rest. The framework is taught in schools, printed on food packages, embedded in apps and repeated by doctors, dietitians, fitness experts and public-health campaigns.

Yet recent discoveries regarding nutrition and metabolism suggest this understanding is incomplete. The number on a nutrition label tells us how much chemical energy a food contains but surprisingly little about what the body does with it.

When we eat, the energy in the food is shared between our own cells and the trillions of microbes that inhabit our intestines. How much energy we absorb depends on the quality of the food and our gut microbiome. Controlled trials show how important this can be. On highly processed diets, the body can absorb roughly 97% of consumed calories. On minimally processed diets rich in intact foods, absorption can fall to 85% or lower. For a 2,500-calorie diet, that difference is about 300 calories a day. Yet the calorie counts appear identical.

Calorie totals also don't tell us where the absorbed energy goes. The quality of what we eat influences hormones, immune function, inflammation, insulin signaling and our gut bacteria. Together, these systems determine how nutrients are partitioned in the body. Some dietary patterns favor maintaining lean muscle, and others storing fat. Even among fat stores, food choices can send calories to fat stored beneath the skin or to metabolically dangerous visceral fat—draped around and within the liver, pancreas, intestines and other organs.

Most surprising, the food we eat doesn't determine only the energy we consume. It alters the energy we burn. For most adults, resting metabolism—the energy required simply to keep the body alive—accounts for roughly two-thirds of total daily energy burned. Our food choices can alter this resting metabolic rate by up to 300 calories a day. Refined grains and added sugars in particular appear to lower the amount of energy burned, while healthy fats help preserve it.

The number of calories burned at rest also depends partially on thermogenesis—the process by which specialized cells in the body burn calories to generate heat, functioning like tiny biological furnaces. Emerging evidence suggests that specific nutrients activate thermogenesis, including compounds found in fatty fish, extra-virgin olive oil, berries, beans, chili peppers, green tea and fermented foods.[...]

As I explained to my patient, she didn't struggle to lose weight because of lack of discipline. She struggled because counting calories doesn't account for the complexities of human biology. The path to lasting weight control and health begins by focusing less on counting calories and more on eating quality foods that support our biology.

This framework also makes eating more simple and joyful. Humans are wired to enjoy food, share meals, celebrate, travel, raise families and live their lives—not to perform nutritional bookkeeping from breakfast to bedtime.

Dr. Mozaffarian is a cardiologist at Tufts University and author of "Food Is Medicine: Healing Our Bodies, Nourishing Our Minds and Transforming Our Food System," forthcoming Oct. 20.